



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Whooping Crane Update – December 14, 2011

Individuals of the Aransas-Wood Buffalo whooping crane population began arriving on the Texas coastal bend and Aransas National Wildlife Refuge wintering grounds in late October. Habitat conditions appear to be somewhat challenging for whooping cranes this year, specifically with regard to drought and salinity aspects.

Precipitation/Salinity: Salinity levels in the San Antonio Bay are currently 35.3 parts per thousand, resulting in many cranes frequently utilizing inland freshwater sources. To date, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge has received 14 inches of precipitation, which is approximately 23 inches below the annual average.

Red Tide: In addition, harmful algae blooms, known as red tide, have occurred along the Texas coast. Red tide toxins can accumulate in fish, oyster, and clam populations in the bays, possibly causing illness and/or death to cranes and other wildlife consuming toxic seafood. Fortunately, there are no known reports of cranes dying from red tide in past outbreaks; biologists continue to keep a vigilant watch. Recent cooler temperatures have helped reduce red tide blooms.

Research and Science: The first whooping crane flight of the season was conducted on Thursday, December 8th, in response to confirmation of the first whooping crane mortality discovered the previous day. One juvenile crane was found dead from unknown causes. The carcass has been sent to the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, WI for disease testing. The goal of the flight was to assess the general distribution and condition of the whooping crane population. During the flight, biologists noted a significant number of cranes were observed in the uplands, as opposed to marshlands where they are typically found. Field observations have resulted in biologists finding evidence of wolfberry and blue crab remains in crane scat. It appears that cranes are utilizing some resources within the marsh. A second flight to estimate the population will be scheduled for January.

Management: In recognition of extreme drought conditions along the entire Texas coast, refuge officials spent the summer planning for the return of cranes. This included initiating work to maximize freshwater output from existing wells located throughout the refuge. The Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island NWR, a non-profit organization of volunteers dedicated to supporting the refuge in its goal of enhancing habitat and wildlife, have been instrumental in raising funds for converting windmills to solar pump energy.

Prescribed burning, which can provide additional food resources for cranes lasting several weeks, has been planned for over 9700 acres. The refuge recently conducted its first burn of the season, consisting of 654 acres of whooping crane habitat, and refuge officials observed immediate use by cranes.

After a successful nesting season, with approximately 37 chicks fledging from a record 75 nests in August 2011, biologists anticipate that the flock size could reach record levels this winter, possibly 300.

Helpful Information:

Whooping Crane Draft Revised International Recovery Plan (2006):

<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/aransas/pdf/WHCR%20RP%20Final%207-21-2006.pdf>

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